The Heritage of Dalits

Those who stood by the Dalits

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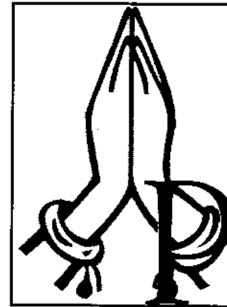
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Preface

In the pages that follow, you will discover so many noble souls who have worked to eliminate discrimination in society.

Very little is known to the public about the sacrifices made by these personalities, who were least interested in publicity for themselves and in politicising their social work. They have no political agenda, no commercial interest; all that they wished was to uplift human values which keep slipping again and again in the world. Therefore, it is only fair for us to remember and acknowledge their efforts to reform the society from time to time. This is the real heritage of the dalits. Many dalits do not even know this and hence do not claim their heritage

One cannot claim to be great working for one's own family, caste, community or religion. ***But those who care for a cause or for the entire humanity cutting across differences of caste, creed and nationality are indeed great saints.*** It appears that today's society has completely ignored the yeoman contributions of these selfless humanists and it only shows one's ignorance, if one considers Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as the only saviour of the dalits.

Atrocities keep happening in one form or another, for one reason or another and from time to time. Today, the question raised is about the discriminative nature of the caste system and the ill-effects caused by it.

To eliminate discrimination, we need to work from two directions:

1. To educate the upper castes on human values and scriptural injunctions and illuminate the fact that our scriptures neither sanction nor subscribe to any inhuman attitudes.

2. To make the lower castes aware that their self-dignity springs from within and that access to wisdom is their birthright, thereby establishing self-confidence and a sense of equality in their consciousness.

We have seen dalits opting to convert to another religion to maintain their dignity. Has this worked in the past? The answer is an emphatic No! In fact, they have taken untouchability to religions like Christianity, Islam and Buddhism which do not recognise caste discrimination. What else does one say to the emergence of new 'castes' like Dalit Muslims, Dalit Christians etc? The dalits, by converting to another religion, have achieved little of significance. They have accepted defeat at the hands of the protagonists of the caste system, allowing them to have their way and stall the process of reform.

Discrimination of any sort is against human values. In the name of reform and upliftment, today's political and social systems are pitting one against the other, sowing hatred and perpetuating a sense of rejection from the past. This has caused a culprit consciousness and a victim consciousness in our

society. Culprit consciousness creates guilt while victim consciousness creates a desire for revenge. A society bogged down by guilt and a desire for revenge can never be at peace. Discrimination can be rooted out only by the twin approach of education and creating awareness.

Revenge and guilt are nothing but two sides of the same coin. After revenge, one feels guilty while the victims thirst for revenge. How then, can we bring an end to this vicious cycle?

Sri Sri Ravishankar says, "Only spiritual knowledge can free you from guilt and revenge".

The most misunderstood, misused and misrepresented institution in India is the Caste System. The misinterpretation and interpolation of some of the Smritis have also contributed to this. Swami Dayananda Saraswati (founder of Arya Samaj) and Sri Aurobindo Ghosh have contributed a lot to sorting out the misrepresentation. However, only the atrocities committed in the name of the caste system have been highlighted in the press and media. The reforms as well as unity among people of various castes and backgrounds that has happened in the past and is happening through the efforts of many saints have gone largely unreported.

This book will serve as an eye-opener for those who do not know how many saints and sages have stood by the dalits and how many of these saints are from the dalits themselves. The work done by these saints are the real heritage of the dalits of this country. This book would perhaps inspire one to work for a cause, not just because one belongs to a specific community, religion or caste but, for the simple fact that one is a human being.

Lastly, though we do not subscribe to the ideas of high caste and low caste, untouchables and untouchability, we are compelled to use these words in this book in order to convey the situation prevalent in those times.



Sri Sri Ravishankar

A spiritual master who combines ancient wisdom, simplicity, elegance and grace, his appeal cuts across geographical boundaries and barriers of caste, creed and culture. He has been instrumental in bringing about a transformation in the lives of millions of people all over the world, by elevating them to a mature understanding of life through The Art of Living workshops and Satsangs (spiritual assembly).

Sri Sri Ravishankar was born in 1956 in an eminent family in South India. From a very young age, he used to sit rapt in meditation and at the age of four, he recited the Bhagavad Gita, much to the amazement of his teachers and parents. By the age of seventeen, he completed his education in modern sciences as well as ancient vedic systems of knowledge.

Sri Sri Ravishankar says, "Seeing god in yourself is meditation. Seeing god in the person next to you is Seva (service). In life, we need both - meditation and service". He is the inspiration for numerous service projects all over the world. One such is The Art of Living Foundation, whose international headquarters is in Bangalore, India. The Art of Living Foundation is dedicated to spreading Sri Sri Ravishankar's message of belongingness and service.

With his guidance, several schools imparting free education for dalit children have been set up in Karnataka and the tribal areas of Bihar, Gujarat, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and North East India. The school in Bangalore caters to the children of the poor and underprivileged in more than 20 villages. Most of the children in this school are dalits. They are given free food, transport, clothes, books and other educational aids. A special priest training program is also offered for these dalit children.

The Art of Living Foundation in association with the International Association for Human Values is engaged in empowering dalit women in a number of villages in South India by providing them vocational training and a means of financial sustenance.

All over the world, the satsang of The Art of Living Foundation is a common thread connecting the diverse segments of society.

SRI SRI RAVISHANKAR SPEAKS

Any type of discrimination whether based on caste, religious beliefs, gender or economic status is inhuman and needs to be censured. On the one hand, it has to be condemned and on the other, it is not healthy to nurture ill-feeling and hatred between communities.

The protagonists of the caste system in India justify the discrimination, saying it is a world-wide phenomenon. They quote the discrimination in Japan, Korea, European Royalty and between the slaves and their masters in America and England. They even quote some stray referneces from teh scriptures, out of context to support their stand. They are thoroughly mistaken.

There is absolutely no evidence or sanction of the practice of untouchability in any of the ancient Vedic scriptures.

Different communities congregate according to their descent or profession everywhere in the world. Communities of doctors, engineers, intellectuals, business persons and labourers form their own professional associations where only professionals

are allowed, chambers of commerce where only businessmen are allowed and labour unions where only labourers are allowed. It is quite natural to have communities based on profession. If one looks back into history, such a settlement of communities always prevailed which eventually created groupism and exclusivity.

The ancient Vedic scriptures have beautifully depicted how the four different castes form one body of society and related them to the various parts of the human body. The head represents the intellectuals (i.e. brahmins); the shoulders and arms, the warriors (i.e kshatriyas); the thighs and belly, the business community (i.e. vaishyas) and the feet, the labour force (i.e. shudras). The Vedas have given equal status and honour to all the communities, as different parts of the same body cannot be labelled as good or bad. This clearly indicates that the four groups have honoured and acknowledged one another and lived in harmony. When the head, feet and hands come together, it is called *Pranaam* which is the highest expression of gratitude.

In those days, descent or family lineage was not a prominent issue. In the ancient times many brahmins became kings and the kings became Rishis. Many shudras became leaders of society and great intellectuals. Evidently, in these times there was no discrimination or division between the castes.

From the four major castes if someone failed in their duties, he was isolated for a period of time. In the ancient times, though they were kept outside society, they were not disgraced. Later, when the caste system became more rigid, these people were not re-admitted into society and became a caste by themselves, known as the atishudras or nishadas.

Unfortunately, with the passage of time, those in power concealed these facts to exploit the caste system to their own advantage and inhuman treatment was meted out to those outcasted.

If the lineage of the great Rishis is reviewed it would be seen that except a few Rishis like Vasishta and Vamadeva, many hail from 'lower' castes. Such meritorious people were given respect and recognition in society, in accordance with their work rather than descent, like Satyakam Jabala, who was born of a prostitute and later became a renowned Rishi. In ancient India, whenever anyone from any caste got enlightened, they were given a lot of respect.

In Bhagawad Gita, Lord Krishna says that the four divisions have been made according to people's occupations each having their own qualities and characteristics. Lord Krishna was born in the Yadava community which is today considered as one among the OBC (Other Backward Castes). However, he is honoured and loved as one of the highest manifestations of the divine and is revered by people of all castes. If the caste system had ever existed with such rigidity, then who would have accepted Sri Krishna as the manifestation of the Lord? There is also a mention of Lord Kartikeya who married a tribal woman and that she is worshipped as the wish-bestowing Goddess. It proves that caste based discrimination was neither originally sanctioned nor considered authentic in the scriptures. It is only later that this evil has surfaced in society.

In Sanskrit language, the term shudra means one who lives by habit and is bound by it. Every child lives by habit and hence strictly everyone is a shudra by birth. Shudra also means one who is covered with sorrow and sadness.

All the four castes exist in every family: the child bound by its habits is the shudra, the youth concerned only with gains and losses is the vaishya and the father being the provider and protector of the family is the kshatriya. The mother in every family is the brahmin, she doesn't think of saving things for herself and puts the family's needs before her own.

The Rishis and the Vedas say 'Vasudhaiva kutumbakam'- it means the entire world is your family. So, how can one justify treating the dalits as outcaste and not as part of oneself? To exclude people from the social structure is going against the Vedas, which brings disgrace to the tradition.

Shiva is called Mahadeva which means 'The Lord of Lords' and is himself the Nishada (untouchable - one cannot touch or perceive him through any of the senses). In the famous Rudram it is chanted, 'nishadebhyascha vo namo', meaning "I bow down to the nishada". Lord Shiva, who is one of the most widely worshipped Gods in India, is also the Lord of the outcastes and the tribals - Kirata. *Those who practise untouchability need to ponder; while they worship Shiva at home, they treat humans in an inhuman manner.* The Upanishads categorically declare that every human being is divine irrespective of caste, creed or family descent.

History shows that the great Adi Shankaracharya himself and many other saints have worked towards the upliftment of the dalits and the social outcastes. A true brahmin is the one who is not just the body or the mind, but who is everything, one who has realised Brahman (the Self).

Discrimination against dalits cannot be stopped by protest or agitation. What is needed is for the entire society to engage

in Satsang (spiritual assembly). It must be understood that the notion of untouchability, apart from being against religion and scriptures, is also unethical and inhuman. In fact, discrimination existed not only between upper and lower castes, but was prevalent even within the higher castes. People misused religion and scriptures for their narrow-minded and selfish motives. The Vaishnavite[1] Brahmins and Shaivite[2] Brahmins had such a rift till the early 1960's; one would not eat food with the other or even look at the other, though both claimed to be brahmins. In fact, the forefathers of many caste Hindus were untouchables (reforms brought by Sri Ramanujacharya) and many dalits' forefathers were at some time caste Hindus.

There is a saying, "Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater". Just being angry about the past will not be productive in the present. Dalits should not discard the Vedic wisdom for the behaviour and treatment meted to them in the past, instead they need to own it and have to realise that many saints of all different backgrounds have stood by them.

1. Worshippers of Lord Vishnu ; 2. Worshippers of Lord Shiva



Ancient Age

This Age was characterised by wisdom and sensitivity. It was a period when the light of knowledge shone brightly through the seers of the Self. Knowledge and principles of all facets of life - from family life to town planning to astronomy to human physiology to spirituality, the epics viz. Ramayana and Mahabharata - were revealed.

This was also the period when the *Varnaashrama Dharma* came into existence. The caste system as we know it today is but a corrupted derivative of this social system. The guiding principle was to allow the man to do what he did best. Based on individual aptitude and conduct, society was organised into four varnas (castes) as follows:-

Brahmins - those with an aptitude for philosophy and dissemination of knowledge. They were the advisors, the upholders of knowledge in society.

Kshatriyas - those with an aptitude for organisation, administration and defence. They were the rulers; responsible for protection and welfare of society.

Vaishyas - those with an aptitude for commerce and finance. They were responsible for the economic welfare of society. They were also responsible for charity.

Shudras - those with an aptitude for service and maintenance. They were the support and maintenance system for society. Without them, the brahmins, kshatriyas and vaishyas would not have been able to successfully perform their respective duties.

Welfare and progress could result only with total co-operation and interaction between all the classes. There was no concept of 'upper' and 'lower' classes and each role was considered important and essential. It was neither birth nor monetary status that decided one's caste; it was only one's aptitude.

Maharishi Valmiki - a hunter and robber, who later created the epic Ramayana and Maharishi Veda Vyasa - a fisherwoman's son who gave us the Vedas, Puranas, Mahabharata and Shrimad Bhagavatam lived in this age. In fact most of the Rishis mentioned in the Hindu traditions hail from dalits.

The Scriptures say...

"From the Supreme Being arise the Holy Sages,
From the Supreme Being arise these Kshatriyas,
From the very same Supreme Being are born the Brahmins,
From the Supreme Being arise the food producing third caste (Vaishyas).
The Supreme Being is also the Shudras serving the Kshatriyas,
...
The Supreme Being is the fishermen,
The Supreme Being is the servants,
The Supreme Being indeed is these gamblers.
Man as well as woman originate from the Supreme Being.
Women are God and so are men."

- ***Atharvaveda*** *(Paippalada Samhita) 8.9.8-10*

"Listen about caste, Yaksa dear, not study, not learning is the cause of the brahmin status. Conduct is the basis, there is no doubt about it."

- ***Mahabharata*** *III.312.106*

"If one's birth were to decide one's caste, then all should be Brahmins because all humans beings have one Father- Prajapati (God, the protector and master of all creation)."

- ***Shukraniti*** *Chapter 1*

"I do not know this, Sir, of what family I am. When I asked this of my mother, she answered : 'In my youth, when I went about freely serving as a maid, I got you. So I do not know of what family you are.

However, I am Jabala by name; you are Satyakama by name.' So I am Satyakama Jabala, sir."
To him he then said: "Bring the fuel, my dear. I will receive you as a pupil. You have not deviated from the truth."

- ***Chhandogya Upanishad*** *4.4.1-5*

"He, in whom are manifest truthfulness, charity, forbearance, good conduct, non-injury, austerity and compassion, is a Brahmin according to the sacred tradition."

- ***Mahabharata*** *III.180.20*

"He in whom good conduct is manifest, is a Brahmin and in whom this is absent, treat such as Shudra."

- ***Mahabharata*** *III, 180.27*

"Sakti, born of a Chandala (dalit) woman, became a great Rishi. Hence, it is tapas (austerity and penance) that makes one a Brahmin, and not his birth."

- ***Srimad Bhagvata Purana***

"The four castes have emanated from Me, by the different distribution of qualities and actions. Know Me to be the author of them, yet actionless and inexhaustible."

- ***Bhagavad Gita*** *Ch.4-13*

Bhishma said:

"A man of wisdom cannot catch hold of a sinful person and forcibly cause him to become righteous. When seriously urged to act righteously, the sinful only act with hypocrisy, impelled by fear. They that are righteous among the shudras never betake themselves to such hypocrisy under the plea that persons of the Shudra order are not permitted to live according to any of the four prescribed modes."

Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva *164*

Shaabara Rishi was a Dalit!

Shaabara Maharishi is considered one of the foremost authorities on the Vedas; he has written commentaries on the Vedas and Meemamsa (Karma Kanda). Today, vedic scholars hold Shaabara Bhashya as an invaluable reference book.

Few know that the author, Shaabara Maharishi, was an atishudra or untouchable. This fact has been conveniently suppressed by the caste-protagonists.

It is such an irony that one can have reverence for the Shaabara Bhashya and not for its creator-Shaabara Maharishi.

Did

You

Know

?

|| Vajrasuchika Upanishad ||

All Upanishads are classified under one of the four Vedas. The Vajrasuchika Upanishad is classified under the Samaveda and discusses the true basis of one's caste.

The 'Vajrasuchi' is a doctrine that dispels ignorance and is an ornament to those who possess Viveka (faculty of discrimination).

Brahmin (priests), Kshatriya (soldiers and kings), Vaishya (merchants and agriculturists) and Shudras (artisans and farmers)- these are the four castes.

In this regard, the following enquiry is made:

Who is a brahmin'?

Is it the individual soul (jiva) or is it the body? Is the family and parentage responsible for brahminhood or is it the performance of stipulated deeds and fruits thereof which makes one eligible for brahminhood?

Is it the individual soul (jiva)?

We disagree with the first option of the Jiva, because the nature (swarupa) of the Jiva remains the same in all bodies, past, present or future, that it manifests in. The different births are governed by the preceding Karmas without any change to the Jiva. *Hence, the designation, 'brahmin' cannot apply to the Jiva.*

Is it the body?

We disagree with this, because the bodies of all human beings irrespective of caste have the same nature and are subject to the same infirmities without exception to colour or creed. *Hence, the body cannot bear the designation, 'brahmin'.*

Is it the class by birth?

We disagree with this, because many of our illustrious es have emerged from different walks of life. *Hence it is not the class by birth, which can be the determining factor for the designation 'brahmin'.*

Is it one's spiritual knowledge?

We disagree with this, because there are many who have realized the Supreme Reality and have attained wisdom from all varnas. *Therefore, knowledge does not determine brahminhood.*

Is it one's karma?

We disagree with this, because the causal effects of karmas is common to all human beings. Meritorious deeds are impelled by good karmas of the past and *hence neither does karma make one a brahmin nor is the performer of good deeds a brahmin.*

Is it the performance of meritorious deeds?

We disagree with this, because there have been many kshatriyas, vaishyas and shudras who have done meritorious deeds like having gifted gold to the needy etc. *Therefore, the performer of meritorious deeds is not the brahmin.*

Then, who indeed is a brahmin'?

He, who, after having all his desires fulfilled as a result of perceiving directly the Self, one without a second, bereft of

clan and attributes, actionless, free of all defects like the six infirmities viz. old age, death, sorrow, delusion, hunger and thirst and the six states viz. birth, existence, growth/development, transformation, waning and perishing, of the nature of immutable reality, of consciousness, blissful and infinite, an independent entity, devoid of determinations, but is itself the support of infinite determinations, is present in all living and non-living beings as the immanent Soul, pervades the interior and envelopes the exterior of everything, possesses the attribute of total bliss, is incomparable, is known only through one's own experience and is inferred only indirectly, becomes free of the defects of desire, attachment and the like, becomes endowed with the qualities like tranquility etc., becomes free of behaviours like jealousy, greed, expectations, delusion etc., and leads a life in which the mind is not tainted by pretensions, ego and the like.

He alone, who possesses the aforementioned characteristics, is a brahmin- such is the import of Sruti, Smriti, Itihasa and the Puranas. There is no other way of attaining brahminhood.

Such is this Upanishad doctrine!



Lord Shiva

Lord Shiva is traditionally regarded as the lord of the outcastes. He is said to inhabit the graveyard and all the outcastes of society are his followers. Yet, he is the foremost deity in many an upper caste household. The *Rudram* and *Chamakam* addressed to him, is recited by the most devout Hindus in their religious practices. *In the Rudram, Lord Shiva is addressed as a* **Nishada** *(an outcaste) and Punjishta (a bird hunter).*

He is often referred to as a *'Kirata'* in the Puranas. The Kiratas would currently fall in the 'Scheduled Tribes' (ST) category in modern India.

Once, Lord Shiva presented himself in Adi Shankaracharya's path as a Chandala (outcaste). He was asked by Shankaracharya and his devotees to move out of the way. The Chandala then asked him, "What should move away, the body or the Self? The body cannot move on its own and the self is omnipresent. What are you asking to move?". Shankaracharya was humbled and fell at the feet of the Chandala. Shankaracharya accepted him as his Guru and wrote a poem which said, "I pay my respects to my Guru, the one who is self-realised, be he of any caste or creed."



Sri Krishna

(circa 3100 BC)

Who does not know Sri Krishna? He is regarded as the complete manifestation of Divinity.

The highest teachings of Hinduism were revealed by him in the Bhagavad Gita[1]. Here, he has said that all the four varnas have emerged from the same Divinity: "The four castes have emanated from Me, by the different distribution of qualities and actions. Know Me to be the author of them, yet actionless and inexhaustible."

Ironically, Sri Krishna grew up as a cowherd and belonged to the Yadava sub-caste which is currently enumerated amongst the 'Other Backward Castes' (OBC's) in India!

In India, Lord Krishna is worshipped by one and all as the upholder of righteousness, destroyer of injustice and bestower of joy.

1. Bhagavad Gita - The Song Divine, is the most popular and revered scripture of India



Rishi Veda Vyasa

(circa 3000 BC)

Who was Veda Vyasa? He was the son of a woman who used to sell fish to earn a living. Today, wherever knowledge is propagated and worshipped, the place is called *Vyasapeeth* - Vyasa's throne.

Considered the greatest of the Rishis, he compiled the Puranas, which are the mainstay of Hinduism. He organised the Vedas for the good of mankind and wrote the Brahma Sutras (considered as one of the triple canon of Vedantic Hinduism, the other two being Bhagavad Gita and Upanishads) for the quick and easy understanding of the Srutis. He also wrote the Mahabharata which conveys the highest knowledge in a simple manner that is easy to understand.

His birthday is celebrated as 'Guru Poornima'. All Hindu monastic orders trace their lineage from him and a popular saying goes: "*Vyasocchishtam jagat sarvam*" meaning that so great was the learning of Rishi Veda Vyasa, that even his voluminous writings represent only the periphery of his knowledge.



Rishi Valmiki

Valmiki was not the name that his parents chose for the poet. His real name was Ratnakara.

Ratnakara was a hunter with a sure aim. To the birds and beasts of the forest, he became verily Yama, the God of Death. He resorted to dacoity and murder to provide food and clothing for his family. He attacked people going from one village to another and took away all that they had.

A chance encounter with the great Rishi Narada, helped him open his eyes to his misdeeds and turn a new leaf. With guidance from the revered Rishi and his own perseverance, he came to be known as Brahmarishi Valmiki (Brahmarishi is the highest in the order of Rishis).

Valmiki, whoever, whatever he was, is now worshipped everywhere. He is best known for his monumental epic, Ramayana - the story of the trials and tribulations of Lord Rama, who was considered an incarnation of the Divine. Today, Rama Naama (the name of Rama) and the Ramayana is a source of solace for millions of people all over India.



Tirthankara Mahavira

(599 - 527 BC)

Mahavira, was the last of the Jain Tirthankaras (Holy Masters). Though born in a royal family, he was more of a reformer. He was born in the Kshatriya Licchavi tribe of Bihar.

Mahavira lived a life of absolute truthfulness, honesty and chastity. He lived without possessing any property at all. He regarded not just all people, but all living beings and things equal. There was no caste or religion which was superior or inferior for Mahavira - everything was equally worthy of respect. He treated people from different castes and creeds as one.

He was perhaps the most powerful proponent of Ahimsa - the principle of non-violence to all living things and practice of vegetarianism.



Lord Buddha

(560 - 480 BC)

In the sixth century before the Christian era, people had forgotten the essence of religion. The lofty teachings of the Vedas were relegated to the background.

At such a critical period, when there was cruelty, degeneration and unrighteousness everywhere, Buddha was born, to reform the people and disseminate the message of equality, unity and cosmic love.

He was born in a marginal kshatriya tribe called Shakya. He lived and died a Hindu although his followers founded a new religion in his name. He advocated the supremacy of good ethics and morality over philosophical speculation and ritualism. He is considered as the ninth incarnation of Lord Vishnu by devout Hindus.

Lord Buddha and Lord Mahavira were contemporaries who brought about societal and spiritual regeneration all over India. Buddha abolished casteism completely. He propagated his ideals amongst all sections of society thus working as a binding force of different castes and creeds.

In ancient India, wisdom was available to all and instances of those born in a lower caste and being renowned and respected were quite common and not something to be amazed about. Amongst the thousand and odd Rishis, one will find that many were from lower castes and a sizeable number were from Atishudra (untouchable) caste. Everyone of them is considered as an embodiment of wisdom. The caste protagonists have successfully suppressed the fact by saying, "Never ask about the origin of a Rishi or a river".



Maharishi Matanga: He identified himself with the dalits. Hailing from a Shudra caste, he patronised the outcastes who were called Chandalas in those days. Even today, many sections of the dalits are addressed as Matangas or Madigas (in Karnataka state). The Varaha Purana has many passages extolling the virtues of Maharishi Matanga.

In the medieval times, the selfish attitude of the upper castes towards the Matangas, deprived them of the knowledge of Sanskrit and their heritage. Thus, they were denied access to scriptures that praise their forefathers.

Maharishi Aitreya Mahidasa: He was born in the lowest caste, his mother was a maid named Itara. This Rishi is credited with the compilation of the Aitreya Brahmana and sections 1-3 of the Aitreya Aranyaka (the latter contains the Aitreya Upanishad - one of the ten major Upanishads for Hindus) belonging to the Rigveda.

Rishi Vatsa: A descendant of Rishi Kanva; he was called a

shudra-putra (son of a shudra).



Mahatma Vidura: He was the son of a maid of King Dhritrashtra (the father of Kauravas in the Mahabharata). He was the foremost exponent of law in his time. His counsel was sought by the rulers and the ruled. His teachings are collected in the 'Viduraprajagar' section of the Udyog Parvan (fifth book) of Mahabharata.

Rishi Kakshivat: He was a Brahmavadin (one who has the knowledge of Brahmavidya) and was the son of a shudra maid servant (Brihaddevata 4.24-25).

Shabari: She was a woman born in the hunter caste. Even today, people consider Shabari as an example for devotion.

Rishi Kapinjalada: According to Mahabharata (Anusasana Parva 53.13-19), Rishi Kapinjalada was a Chandala (dalit). He was revered and respected by all the Rishis of his time. Emperor Yudhishtira used to approach him for advice.

Rishi Madanapala: Rishi Madanapala was the son of a boatwoman.

Rishi Kaushika: The Mahabharata narrates the story of Rishi Kaushika. Though a learned brahmin, he could not get enlightenment till he approached a butcher (who was a dalit) and sat at his feet and sought his blessings.

Similarly, there are stories of Rishi Raikva and Jabala Maharishi in the Upanishads. All these clearly indicate a delinking of descent and wisdom.

Sootha Maharishi, the narrator of the Puranas[1]

Lomaharsha, born in the lowest caste, was an erudite scholar and was held in high esteem by the Rishis of his time. He was of such a pious nature and character, that he was made the chairperson of an assembly of Rishis.

Once it happened that King Balarama of the Yadava clan, came to this assembly. On finding a man from the lowest caste occupying the highest seat, Balarama beheaded him (Lomaharsha). The entire assembly including the Rishis were shocked and furious at Balarama.

Balarama repented for his act and pleaded to be forgiven. Lomaharsha's son, Sootha, was then given the honour of leading the assembly. Sootha Maharishi, hailing from the lowest caste, was accorded the highest respect of narrating the Puranas.

How can the caste protagonists honour Sootha Maharishi on the one hand and mistreat dalits on the other?

Did You Know ?

1. Puranas are commentaries on the Vedas. They are full of stories that convey the richness of Indian culture and heritage.

edieval Age

This age saw the birth of the Bhakti (Devotion) Movement all over India. It was a spiritual wave that engulfed the entire nation, transcending all barriers of caste, creed and gender. The saints of this time helped bring society together with the unifying bond of devotion and spirituality. They travelled all over the country and transformed the society through songs and poems in the local languages that glorified the Divine and helped reinforce human values.

These saints did not belong to any one particular caste or community. Thus we have Sant Kabirdas who was a weaver, Sant Raidas who was a cobbler, Sant Tukaram who was a trader, Sant Janabai who was a maid servant, Sant Jnaneshwar who was a brahmin, Sant Kanakadasa who was a shepherd and so on. Without exception all of them preached that devotion to the Divine recognised no barriers of caste or creed.



Tirumular

(6th - 7th century AD)

"Love and Shiva are not two. Only the ignorant say so. Love alone is Shiva.
When that realisation dawns, they remain in love of Shiva."

Tirumular was originally a Yogi called Sundarar residing on Mount Kailas. Once, he noticed a herd of cows lowing miserably around the dead body of their cowherd, Moolan. Deeply moved by their plight, the yogi who gave the famous dictum 'Anbe Shivam' (God is Love) thought it as his duty to help the dumb creatures. By his yogic powers he abandoned his body and entered the dead cowherd's body. He led the herd back to the village and returned to the spot where he had left his own body. Not finding his own body there, unperturbed and realising the Divine will, the Yogi continued to remain in the cowherd's body. He came to be known as Tirumular.

The religious and spiritual path blazed by Tirumular broadened later into the highway of devotion known as Shaiva Siddhantam. Nurtured by the Nayanmars, it has played an important role in the development of Tamil culture.

His fervent dictum, 'Onre Kulamum, Oruvane Devanum'- the whole mankind is one family and the Lord we worship is only one, illumines the essence of true religion. The 3000 verses uttered by him formed the text ***Tirumandiram***. The

Tirumandiram is a text of immense depth and scope and deals with various aspects of the practice of yoga, right conduct etc. and emphatically states the oneness of all life. Here it is said that mere outer appearance and mouthing of verses does not make one a brahmin, rather it is the practice and realisation of the truth!



Tiruvalluvar

(circa 2 BC)

Born to a brahmin father and a mother who was the foster child of an untouchable, Tiruvalluvar went on to become one of the greatest scholars of all time. A weaver by profession, his creation, Tirukkural, is considered the pinnacle of Tamil spiritual literature. The Tirukkural is woven into 1330 couplets in 3 major divisions - Virtue, Wealth and Love.

Tirukkural is a guiding light for humanity to lead a life with all human values. It guides mankind to live in moral purity, eternal wisdom and in perfect health, wealth and prosperity.

A few gems from this masterpiece:

"Though one belongs to high caste, when he loses his conduct (good decorum), no more is he of high caste." (134)

"All beings are equal in birth. But work decides their varied worth." (972)

"The greatness of an individual depends on his ability to perform rare deeds, not in their caste." (973)



Ramanujar

(1017 - 1137 AD)

About 865 years ago, a saint had a deep longing to be initiated with a mantra and to know its core substance. He had approached Guru Thirukkotti Nambi seventeen times and was rejected each time. Not one to give up, he approached the Guru once again. This time, the Guru asked the saint to observe fasting for a month at the Thirukkotiyur temple. A month later, the initiation was given with the condition to keep the mantra secret.

With unbounded joy, the saint climbed up the Gopuram (tower of the temple), called the people of the town and declared the gist of the mantra as, "Narayana is the Lord of the worlds, all the creatures are His. The only path to salvation is seva to his creations".

When the Guru heard this he was furious and asked the saint, "Are you aware of the consequence of your action? You have violated your promise to me". The saint replied calmly, "I am aware I will go to hell, whereas all those who listened to the Mantra and its substance will go to heaven!"

This saint who was more concerned for the salvation of his fellow men than his own well-being, is none other than Ramanujar of 12th century. He was a spiritualist and reformer

beyond compare, a giant who gave rise to a great movement of devotion all over the country.

All through his life, Sri Ramanujacharya gave great importance to the conduct and wisdom in a person than their caste or religion. For him, the path of devotion was casteless and classless.

When he was around 30 years old, he came under the influence of Kanchipurna. A Shudra by birth, Kanchipurna was so pious and good that the people of the place had great respect and reverence for him. At present, there is a temple at Kancheepuram where Kanchipurna is worshipped as a saint.

Sri Ramanujacharya baptised several Harijans and abolished the discrimination during his time in parts of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. He opened the doors of the temples to all people and prompted them to recite the mantra ***Om Namo Narayanaya.*** He made many Harijans into temple priests. Till then, mantras could be recited only by brahmins. He initiated several people from the lower classes including washermen and pariahs and brought about a wave of devotion to God, thus purifying the society to a great extent.

While returning from his daily dip in the Cauvery River he used to walk with his hands on the shoulders of Villidasan, an untouchable. He explained to the baffled disciples that he did so because, Villidasan was humble, egoless and hence the abode of the Divine.

At Tirupati, he provided free meals for the pilgrims who came to have a glimpse of the Divine irrespective of caste and creed. Thus, he was the pioneer of common dining in the 12^{th}

century. Even today this practice is continued.

He was instrumental in the installation of Bheevi Nachiar (a Muslim deity) in Vishnu temples as a consort of Lord Vishnu. This stands as evidence for his openness towards other religions. Even today, Muslims call Lord Vishnu 'Mappillai Saami' and participate in the temple festivals at Sri Mushnam and Thirukannapuram.

Today we say, 'In the eyes of law all are equal'. Eight centuries ago Sri Ramanujacharya had declared, "In the eyes of the Lord all are equal. Devotees of the Divine belong to one caste, the devotee who blames the other as an untouchable is an untouchable himself".

Swami Vivekananda in his Chicago address conveyed to the world, "Ramanujar brought equality between the high caste and the untouchables". Saint Ramanujar was an irresistible driving force for the eradication of untouchability and was the inspiration for the movement started by Mahatma Gandhi to grant temple entry to untouchables. He was not only a pioneer in the casteless Bhakti movement but also a revolutionary proponent for religious integration and social reform.



Basavanna/Basaveshwara

(1131 - 1167 AD)

In the 12th century, Karnataka was swept by a tidal wave of devotion inspired by the great saint Basaveshwara.

He was the driving force for the Lingayat movement (those who worship Shiva). He exhorted everyone to worship Shiva forgetting their differences over caste and creed. Today, a large portion of the population in Karnataka are Lingayats consisting of people from all sections of society.

The Lingayat movement championed the cause of the downtrodden, rebelling against a system which promoted social inequality by branding a whole class of people as untouchable.

Basaveshwara was born around the year 1131AD in Ingaleshwara Bagewadi in Bijapur district of Karnataka State. Madiraja and Madalambika, of a traditional Brahmin family, were his parents. He was eight when he left his home, severing all relations with his parents and the family. He was guided to Kudala Sangama at the confluence of the sacred rivers, Krishna and Malaprabha where he met his Guru Jataveda Muni.

Basaveshwara left Kudala Sangama after completing his education under his Guru and prompted by an inner calling, joined the service of King Bijjala in Kalyana which is in the

present Bidar District of Karnataka State. Quickly, he rose to become the Minister to the Maharaja. This led to the swift spreading of his revolutionary message of a new, visionary religious society without any caste discrimination.

Basavanna taught that all followers, not just renunciates, could live a holy life and that life in this world is not to be spurned. He said, "Do not postpone living a good life in this world". Each evening he would give discourses denouncing caste hierarchy, magical practices etc., urging growing crowds of listeners to think rationally and worship Shiva as the God within themselves. To him all were equal, irrespective of caste, creed, gender or occupation. He emphasized right conduct, service to the poor and recognition of the dignity of labour.

Basavanna lived and preached at Bijjala for twenty years, developing a large Shaivite religious movement. The function of gathering for discourse became known as Anubhava Mantapa, 'hall of experience'. Devotees from every walk of life flocked from all over India to listen to him.

In spite of having to face a lot of persecution, Basavanna's successful spiritual leadership left a legacy of sainthood, including many women saints. These saints expressed their radical views on religion and society in the local language. They cut through the barriers of caste, creed and gender difference.

The Lingayat movement took more than three decades to blossom fully. The movement attracted many people from towns and villages within Karnataka. Many others came from far - as far as the regions of present day Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Orissa, Kashmir and Afghanistan.

People came from all classes and castes, rich and poor, men and women, old and young. All these people abandoned their prior affiliation to the castes of the hierarchical Hindu society. They were attracted by the principles practised in the new society such as equality, individual freedom, honest work, fraternity, compassion and faith in God. They were known as Virashaivas or brave followers of Shiva.

The Lingayat society was born out of the amalgamation of all the castes. Millions of untouchables joined Basavanna into the Shaiva fold without the use of force. Those who stayed back as dalits, did so of their own choice.

The ***Vachanas*** - what is said, were the scriptures for the Lingayat movement. These prose lyrics mocked ritualism and their authors depicted formal religions as the 'establishment', static institutions that promise man security and predictability. They knew that religion must be dynamic, spontaneous and devoid of bargains extracted in exchange for salvation. The Vachanas are incandescent poetry; full of humor, ridicule and the white heat of truth-seeking, commanding devotees to enter the awesome realm of personal spirituality.

Here below are brief sketches of some of the leading lights of the movement.

Allama Prabhu

If Basavanna was the faith's intellectual and social architect, Allama Prabhu was its austerely mystical powerhouse. The doctrines of these two founders are contained in their Vachanas. Veera Shaiva spiritual authority derives from the life and writings of these two knowers of Shiva and of numerous other

Shivasharanas (those surrendered to Lord Shiva).

Allama wrote, "Feed the poor, tell the truth and build tanks for a town. You may go to heaven after death, but you'll be nowhere near the truth of our Lord". Prabhudeva, as he was affectionately called, chose an ascetic life and traveled preaching spirituality. He came to Kalyana and helped Basavanna in his socio-religious movement. He was the first president of the Anubhava Mantapa. This was a forum where devotees discussed their experiences and doubts in their lives and spiritual development. His Vachanas have many layers of meaning and show the depth of his spiritual experience.

Akka Mahadevi

Mahadevi was born in Udutadi town of the present day Shimoga district in Karnataka. Even as a child, her spiritual leanings were evident. As a young maiden she believed that God was her husband, a permanent spiritual companion. She called her lord Chenna Mallikarjuna. She had studied Basavanna's Vachanas and started writing Vachanas in a similar way to express her feelings and her search for her lord in nature.

Mahadevi's spiritual and mystical experiences blossomed in the nurturing environment of Anubhava Mantapa. Although she was young in age, all the elder contemporaries of Basavanna respected her as their elder sister, *Akka*. In the Shiva society of the twelfth century, it was not the age, but the character and conduct of a person that earned the respect of people.

Akka Mahadevi's life is evidence to the world that a woman can be free and can definitely climb the highest step of the spiritual ladder.

Chennabasavanna

Chennabasavanna was a nephew of Basavanna, who was his spiritual and educational guide. Although young in age, Chennabasavanna was a spiritual intellect who contributed greatly to building the religious forum. He instituted the sixfold path to the realization of God. More than a thousand Vachanas of Chennabasavanna are available to us now.

Chennabasavanna was the second president of Anubhava Mantapa. His life shows that age and years of experience are not prerequisites for achievement in any field.

Dohara Kakkayya

An older contemporary of Basavanna, Kakkayya was a tanner (*dohara*) of the shudra class. Attracted to the egalitarian principles practiced in the new society of Basavanna, he came to Kalyana and joined the new society. Basavanna, impressed by his devotion and his adherence to duty affectionately called him as his '*Appa*,' meaning father. Basavanna would accept the leftover food from Kakkayya's house as a blessing.

Kakkayya gained his self-confidence and self-respect when he came in contact with Basavanna. Basavanna's greatness is in making this opportunity possible to the condemned masses of the times.

Guddavve

Guddavve was a fearless preacher who led a family life as well. She hailed from Umrani village in Bijapur district. Her

spiritual yearnings drove her to Kalyana at a young age. Her spirituality blossomed in Anubhava Mantapa under the guidance of fellow devotees. In Kalyana, she counseled people in distress and was involved in community service.

She is an example of a woman who successfully combined spiritual life, family life and a life of community service.

Haralayya

Haralayya a shudra by birth, was a cobbler. He was attracted to the principles practiced in Basavanna's Shiva society, so he became a member. His devotion and dedication is spoken about in high regard today.

Hadapada Appanna

Appanna was a *hadapa* (barber) by profession. On his own accord he took up the duty of serving Basavanna. He was a companion and confidant of Basavanna and stayed with him till his end.

Madivala Machayya

Machayya was born in Hipparigi town of the present day Bijapur district. He earned his living by cleaning dirty clothes (*madivala*). He believed that just as we clean our dirty clothes we should cleanse our souls by discarding the inner dirt like jealousy, anger, greed and arrogance. Interestingly enough, the story goes that he only cleaned the clothes of people who had cleansed their souls and would not touch the clothes of people who were engaged in unethical behavior. Machayya's story tells us that people can set high goals and values and do their best to

accomplish them. He saw dignity in his labour. In his own way, Machayya contributed to the changing of society.

Medara Ketayya

Ketayya wove *meda* (baskets) with bamboo and tree bark. Ketayya believed that earning by honest work was heaven in itself. He would not give up his work for the temptation of any amount of wealth that was offered to him. If the money was not earned by honest work, it was not fit for keeping. With his earnings he served and fed Shiva devotees and spiritual teachers every day. In his Vachanas he made use of his knowledge of bamboo and weaving.



Sri Kanaka Dasa

(1508 - 1606 AD)

One of the most remarkable saints of the 16th century was Kanaka Dasa of Karnataka. A shepherd by birth, he was a great critic of caste hierarchy and a great disciple of Sri Vyasaraja.

He preached that there are no distinctions of caste, creed or gender.

There is a popular story that Kanaka when denied entry to the temple at Udupi, went round the Sanctum Sanctorium and burst into tears of song, appealing to the Lord to appear before him. The idol turned around, made a slit in the wall behind which Kanaka sat. At another time, when Kanaka was questioned by the Mahant of the Tirupati temple he replied, "What is the caste to me who is intoxicated with the love of Adikeshava (Lord Krishna)?"

Sri Kanaka Dasa was a 'liberal thinker' and his compositions exhibit a strong fighting style that delivers the message directly. He put great effort in reforming the repressed classes, weaning them away from ignorance, superstitions and barbaric practices, in order to favour the growth of devotion in them. His love for his people made him disregard his own life for the sake of their transformation into a life of non-violence.



Sri Ramananda

(1366 - 1477 AD)

One of the chief figures of the Bhakti Movement in North India was Sri Ramananda. Born in Prayaga in the 14th century, he was a follower of Sri Ramanujacharya's vishista-advaita philosophy.

He established the sampradaya (tradition) called the Shrisampradaya in Kashi which has one of the largest following in India today.

Ramananda accepted members of all castes and education levels and made exclusive use of the vernacular languages in preference to Sanskrit. Thus, a large section of the population got access to the essence of the ancient wisdom and devotion and were uplifted.

Sant Kabirdas, another revolutionary saint of this period, was initiated by Sri Ramananda.



Kabirdas

(1440 - 1518 AD)

"To associate with a Sadhu is like sitting near a seller of perfumes; though he does not sell you anything, you still enjoy the perfume."

Kabir was born a Hindu and brought up by a Muslim weaver Niru and his wife Nima.

Kabir sought to break the barriers between Hinduism and Islam by going into the heart of religion. He was fully convinced that when it came to any scripture, the orthodox pundits and maulvis who stuck to the 'letter' missed the essence, thus unwittingly turning into hate merchants. Kabir believed that Satsang was a more positive way of forging good character than learning by heart scriptural passages without an idea of their real import.

Kabir declared, "Religion devoid of love is heresy". For him yoga, penance, fasting and alms-giving were empty without meditation.

He conveyed profound spiritual truths to the masses in their language and in a manner that was easily understood. People from all walks of life were drawn to his message emphasising universal love and self-realisation while living.

For Kabir, devotion to the divine superseded differences of religion, caste, gender or occupation. It is said that he invented his own caste -a caste below all others.

Kabir never retired from the world to become a recluse. He was married, had children and was a weaver by profession. He saw life as filled with God in the form of love and joy. However, Kashi being an orthodox city, considered him a heretic and ordered him to leave. Unfazed, Kabir continued to spread his joy of divine love through various songs throughout his travels in North India.

Kabir ranks high among the religious reformers India has ever produced. In his own time, Guru Nanak, Dadu Dayal and several other spiritual leaders acknowledged Kabir's greatness and in later times, Rabindranath Tagore is among the literary giants who have sought to spread Kabir's message. One thing is certain, Kabir's precious teachings continue to inspire those who seek the essence of religion and today stand as a legacy to the nation.



Guru Nanak

(1469 - 1538 AD)

Guru Nanak came to the world with a message of peace, unity, love and devotion to God.

Guru Nanak is revered as the first Sikh Guru. Even in his childhood, Nanak had a mystic disposition and he used to talk about God with Sadhus (men of God). His depth of understanding and clarity of expression amazed his school teachers. Wisdom, charity and care embellished each of his actions; whether he was shopping, or minding a shop or looking after cattle or managing accounts or looking after his wife and children.

Guru Nanak became a public preacher at the age of thirty four. His preaching produced a deep impression on the minds of the public. According to him, "There is no Hindu, no Muslim", implying that the dividing lines between the creeds are unreal and false.

He undertook several tours in India and outside. He visited prominent religious centres of Hindus and Muslims and had discourses and discussions with renowned missionaries and personalities of various religions and leaders of the social order. Wherever he went, large crowds assembled to listen to his message of universal love, humanitarian service and

devotion.

These long journeys gave Guru Nanak a keen insight of the human character which helped him devise effective methods in persuasion. His attractive rationalism brought about amazing transformations in the life and character of all those who came in contact with him. He enjoined on all people to live righteously and with brotherly love and hospitality. Nanak succeeded remarkably in changing the minds of men and winning their love and confidence and in directing them along the path of righteousness and devotion.

Guru Nanak was a reformer. He attacked corruption in society and strongly protested against formalism and ritualism. He believed in a casteless society without any distinctions based on birth, religion or gender. For him, noble character rather than noble birth was the real test of human greatness. He also raised his voice for the upliftment and parity of the downtrodden, lower castes and womenfolk. He allowed them to join all religious gatherings and conferences. He institutionalised the common kitchen called langar. Here everyone, whether king or beggar, sat together and shared a common meal.

Guru Nanak took along with him a large section of the society and integrated people of all religions and castes. His path became a religion called Sikhism and his followers are called Sikhs.



Sant Raidas

(1376 - 1527 AD)

"Every human being has equal rights including the right to worship his God"

Born in the vibrant city of Benares in Northern India, Sant Raidas belonged to the cobbler caste, which was considered untouchable as per the prevailing social order of the day.

Peace-loving and humble, Sant Raidas preached his doctrines without commenting on those who differed. He was a saint as well as a poet and was skilled 'in untying the knots of doubt'. He did not write any treatise but composed only devotional songs or bhajans which inspired devotion in all those who heard them. These songs have been compiled by his disciples and many have been included in the Guru Granth Sahib. He taught that God was accessible to all, irrespective of one's caste or creed and that devotion to God alone could save man.

He was widely hailed and had a large following which included people from diverse backgrounds including cobblers, tanners and kings and queens of different princely states. Raja Nager Mal of Banaras, Rani Jhalanbai and Bhakt Mirabai were some of the disciples of Sant Raidas. His life exemplifies the superficiality of social order in the context of devotion and spirituality.



Bhakt Mirabai

(1498 - 1547 AD)

Mirabai was born toward the end of the 15th century in a noble Rajput family. That period in time was marked by widespread political and social turmoil in India. From childhood, her soul was dedicated to Lord Krishna. Although she was married off to a Rajput prince, her overwhelming devotion to Lord Krishna remained uppermost in her life.

Mirabai was perhaps the first feminist of the world. When she was widowed, she did not follow the practice of ***sati*** (Sati was a practice in which a widow would join her dead husband by entering the funeral pyre) as the Rajput princesses were supposed to. This was unheard of, in those days, that too in the Rajput ruling caste, whose women were subject to some of the most strict restrictions. She broke all the rules in her passionate love for Krishna for which she was severely persecuted by her in-laws.

She disregarded all shackles of orthodoxy and stepped outside the palace to follow her unique path of Bhakti. Royal comforts meant little to her and she gave them up to lead the a spiritual life. Neither did artificial differences of caste or creed matter to her as she mingled with other devotees unmindful of their social or economic status. Her Guru was from the untouchable class - the cobbler saint, Sant Raidas - and this too in 15th century

medieval India!

Mirabai is not only a symbol of the highest form of Bhakti but also a symbol of courage and strength for the manner in which she stood up against all the devious palace intrigues towards her dedication to Lord Krishna.

Her bhajans - mystical love poems for the Lord - are still known and regarded as some of the greatest devotional poetry in the Hindi language. She composed hundreds of poems in a simple, unpretentious style, full of vivacity and feeling. No poetess in the history of India enjoys a greater respect than Meera. Her poems have gained a unique popularity and are sung by the rich and the poor alike, even to this day.



Sant Namadev

(13th century AD)

Sant Namadev, one of the pioneers of the Bhakti movement in Maharashtra, was actually born in a tailor's household, in the town of Pandharpur - a place of pilgrimage in Maharashtra.

He was no saint, to begin with, on the other hand he was a thief and murderer. One day, he overheard a young mother explain to her fatherless child that they had to live in penury because his father was no more. He realised with sudden horror that it was he who was the killer and, filled with remorse, he rushed to the nearby temple to give up his life. He was prevented however, and devoted the rest of his life to penance and worship. Compassion and devotion took the place of violence and greed.

Sant Namadev, immersed in devotion, started composing bhajans. His bhajans cut across superficial divisions of caste and creed and several instances are narrated of how his simplicity won over the intellectuals and higher castes. Although born in a lower caste, he is one of the most venerated saints of western India. He wrote in Hindi as well as Marathi (two sister languages both derived from Sanskrit) and it is interesting to note that quite a few of his Hindi bhajans are included in the Guru Granth Sahib, the scripture of the Sikhs.



Sant Jnaneshwar

(1274 - 1295 AD)

Jnanadev with his sister Muktabai and his two brothers, all four of them poet-saints, had an unhappy childhood. Their father, after living the life of an ascetic, returned to married life. On this account the orthodox brahmins ostracised the whole family. They were thus considered outcastes and were shunned by the society. Soon, their parents passed away leaving them to fend for themselves.

The hardships they faced could not however suppress their innate genius which blazed forth while they were still in their teens. Jnanadev, the greatest of them, is better known as Jnaneshwar, the 'Lord of Wisdom'.

Jnaneshwar was inspired by the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita. He preached the message and meaning of this immortal work embodying the essence of the Hindu faith. His preachings have been collected in a book called Jnaneshwari which he is reported to have completed at the age of fourteen.

He also emphasized the importance of bhakti i.e. pure devotion. He defined Bhakti as 'that in which one thinks of nothing except of God; refuses to hear anything except His name; serves none but God and contemplates on nothing except God' and that the practitioners of Bhakti were sure to get emancipated and attain

God, irrespective of their caste. According to him, untouchability was ruled out in the realm of devotion and spirituality.

He was the philosophical Guru of the Varakari Movement which included several saints drawn from all social classes. Thousands upon thousands joined the movement. They all walked together as pilgrims, sang together and danced together. This movement brought about a remarkable transformation in the life and outlook of the people of Maharashtra. Jnaneshwar was a brahmin, but there were also Namadev - a tailor, Gora Kumbhar - a potter, Savata Mali - a gardener, Chokha Mela - a sweeper, Narhari Sonar - a goldsmith and Tukaram - a trader. There were women among them too - Jnanadev's sister Muktabai, Namadev's servant Janabai and Chokha's wife Soyara. Their outstanding quality is a beautiful fusion of bhakti (devotion) with jnana (knowledge).



Sant Tukaram

(1608 - 1650 AD)

Tukaram, was a trader by profession, but is regarded as the crown of Maratha sainthood after Jnaneshwar. His life is an example which shows that the Love of God is not based on rigid caste, creed, education or race standards but on love itself.

Although, born to an illiterate farmer, Sant Tukaram went on to write some of the most wonderful verses in the Marathi language in the form of abhangas (a style of devotional song). His songs were the spontaneous expression of devotion through singing of bhajans (devotional songs) and dancing in honor of Lord Krishna. They are a combination of a rustic simplicity, profound understanding and ardent devotion.

When his abhangas became very popular with the masses, the religious establishment (the high caste brahmins) began to hate and persecute Tukaram out of a sense of insecurity. They declared that, Tukaram being of low caste, had no right to compose devotional poems and ordered him to throw them into the river flowing through the town. Obediently he did so, but the waters washed them ashore undamaged. Abashed by this, his critics allowed them to be kept. Today, his abhangas are sung by people from all cross-sections of society. Whether educated or illiterate, rich or poor, his abhangas continue to sway people's emotions.

Tukaram believed the body to be the temple of the living lord and idol worship and rituals had no meaning for him. His all-embracing love and forbearance and his special compassion for animals was beyond compare.

His philosophy was simple and effective. He would say, "Sit silently and repeat the name of the Lord. That alone is enough for realization". He constantly emphasised that ethics and orthodox religion were just formalities and the real use of religion is in realization of the divine through Love.



Samarth Ramdas

(1608 - 1680 AD)

The simple village youth was standing in front of his would-be wife about to perform the final rites of marriage. Suddenly, as the priests chanted 'Savadhan' - Be aware, he awakened to the real purpose of his life. Dropping the garlands and his attachments to the world, he ran off to Panchavati to do penance and obtain knowledge. To the thousands of people whose life he touched and transformed, he was known as Samarth Ramdas.

He travelled throughout the country and engaged himself in the task of social and religious upliftment. Samarth Ramdas said, "Although, saints look different, they all are manifestations of the One Divine." Unlike other poet saints he also adopted revolutionary methods to secure the nation's future. Wherever he visited, he organised and inspired the youth to dedicate their lives for the country. He initiated and trained thousands of youth irrespective of their social and religious background.

Samartha Ramdas was a great organiser and a poet. His poetic creation, Dasabodha is at once a book that provides guidance for achieving the spiritual goal as well as for living the worldly life rationally and effectively. It inculcates Vedanta (the essence of Vedic philosophy) in practical terms of daily life. Its code of enlightened conduct covers all social classes and applies to both ruler and ruled.

Sant Eknath

(1533 - 1599 AD)

Rarely did anyone blend devotion and knowledge as beautifully and practiced it by example as Sant Eknath. He taught that bhakti and jnana are like flower and fruit, both going hand in hand. He carried on the tradition of Sant Jnaneshwar and Sant Namdev.

Sant Eknath was known for his never-ending patience and tolerance and compassion towards all living beings. He neither recognised nor acknowledged differences of caste and creed. For him, all beings in creation arose from the one Divine. Once, he was carrying holy water for his worship but gave it to a thirsty donkey.

At another time, on the anniversary of his ancestors he invited an untouchable to his house for food and served him the dishes meant to be served to brahmins as part of a ritual.

Seeing a dalit child crying on the banks of a river, out of compassion, he picked up the child in his arms. This created a furore amongst the orthodox, yet he stood firm.

Sant Eknath, along with Sant Jnaneshwar, Sant Tukaram, Sant Namdev, and Samarth Ramdas are called ***Sant Panchak*** (Five Saints) and are remembered for their significant contribution towards Maharashtra's culture and society.



Chaitanya Mahaprabhu

(1486 - 1533 AD)

Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu was born in a pious family in Nabadwip - a city of learned men. The neighbours called him *Gaur* or *Gaur-Hari* or *Gauranga* (fair-complexioned) on account of his marvellous beauty. *Gaur* means fair and *Anga* means body; and they called him *Gaur-Hari*, because he was so fond of the name 'Hari' that nothing could soothe him when he cried during childhood, save Hari's name.

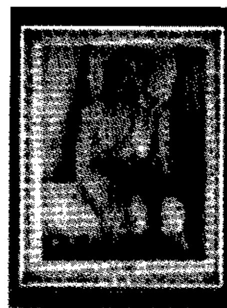
At school, he proved to be a brilliant student and was considered a genius. He quickly mastered all branches of Sanskrit learning such as grammar, logic, literature, rhetoric, philosophy and theology. When he was sixteen, he started a *Tol* or place of learning and was the youngest professor to be in charge of a *Tol*. He excelled all the pundits of his time and soon became proud of his erudition till he met his guru Ishvar Puri.

A sea change came over him as bliss and ecstasy replaced his pride. This marked the beginning of a wave of devotion that gripped India through Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

Through kirtans (devotional singing) he was able to transform the lives and mindset of millions of people. People from all sections of society sang kirtans and danced with gay abandon

forgetting their differences. History records the transformation of criminals, priests, washermen, lepers, scholars, merchants and many more who felt a sense of fulfillment and acceptance with Chaitanya.

Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's life was a stellar example of the unifying aspect of devotion and service, that cuts across the suffocating restrictions imposed by society.



Sri Sankara Deva

(1449 - 1568 AD)

Sri Sankara Deva, the famous Vaishnava saint, was a great religious reformer and poet of the Asamiya language. His recipe to uplift the character of the society was devotion to the Divine. He is the author of numerous works, mostly based on the Bhagavata Purana (stories of the life of Lord Krishna), preached the glory of the lord and conducted devotion sessions (Satradhikara) for the Vaishnavas throughout Assam.

He established Namagharas (halls for collective reciting of the name of the Lord). Most of his creations are based on Bhagavata Purana. 'Kirtana Ghosha' (the resounding of the collective singing of the Name) is his best work.

It was he who originated the famous Assamese form of dance-drama (Natyarupa) known as Ankiya Nataka in Assamese literature. Sri Sankaradeva has the credit of casting the life and culture of the Assamese people into the mould of Vaishnava Bhakti. Singing and dancing and devotion transformed a society that worshipped violence into one that believed in love.

Vararuchi and his Children

Agnihotri - a brahmin; Pakkanar - a pariah[1]; Rajakan - a barber; Perumthachan - a carpenter; were four of the 12 children of Vararuchi, a brahmin!

This is the tale of Vararuchi, one among the Navaratnas (Nine Jewels) in the court of King Vikramaditya. He was a brahmin who married a woman of the shudra caste. Following his marriage, he left the King's service and embarked on a never-ending pilgrimage with his wife.

He had 12 children (11 boys and a girl). All were adopted by different families and took up the caste of their foster parents. Thus, while the eldest son was a brahmin, yet another was a woodcutter, the daughter was an outcaste and so on. Each of the siblings became famous for their wisdom. Every year on the occasion of their biological parent's death anniversary, they would congregate at the residence of the eldest sibling, Agnihotri, to offer their homage. A perfect example of harmony and understanding.

1. Pariah - a lower caste



Modern Age

The Modern Age saw the emergence of philosophers and reformists exhibiting a classic combination of modern scientific temper coupled with ancient spiritual truths. These visionaries took a practical approach to reform. Education, empowerment of oppressed classes, reinterpretation of the ancient scriptures to reveal the eternal truths - were the approaches adopted.

We see Swami Dayanand Saraswati, who, at a young age, could see human values as the basis of the scriptures and not caste. Similarly we have Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who was instrumental in making education accesible to everyone, Swami Vivekananda who brought the timeless wisdom of Vedanta (essence of Vedic philosophy) to the whole of humanity, Babasaheb Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution and of course Mahatma Gandhi - the modern saint and freedom fighter.

Today, several spiritual leaders from India, are engaged in uplifting human values in society through various service projects all over the world.



Dayanand Saraswati

(1824 - 1883 AD)

Swami Dayanand Saraswati was born Moolshankar, in a pious family in Morbi, Gujarat. At a very early age, he mastered the four Vedas. His incisive mind was however dissatisfied with the prevailing atmosphere of ignorance and superstition that stood for religion in the mid 19th century. India had degenerated into splintered kingdoms, with a population that was largely uneducated. The spirit of religion enshrined in the Vedas was undermined in the prevailing chaos.

Swami Dayanand Saraswati took it upon himself to restore the Vedas to their position of pre-eminence in Hindu culture. He gave religious sermons which relied on his keen intellect, reason, steadfastness, fearlessness and knowledge. In the process, he antagonized the establishment with his scathing attacks on the religious mores of the time.

He fought against the restrictions of caste and took several steps for the emancipation of women and oppressed classes. He provided a fresh outlook on the vedic scriptures and was instrumental in clearing the misrepresentation of the Smritis that dealt with caste.

Swami Dayanand established the Arya Samaj in 1875 to carry on his mission. He established the Dayanand Anglo

Vedic schools (DAVs) which impart education in the modern sciences as well as the ancient Vedas.

His contribution to education in modern India has been unparalleled. All over India hospitals, libraries and community halls established by his followers continue to serve the population.



Raja Ram Mohan Roy

(1772 - 1833 AD)

Raja Ram Mohan Roy, born on May 22, 1772, in a prosperous brahmin family, is known as the 'Maker of modern India'. Without giving up what was good and noble in the past, he laid the foundation for a great future. He founded a movement for renaissance of Hindu culture in 19th century Bengal. He challenged traditional culture by organizing religious dissenters and championing educational, social and political reforms.

Ram Mohan campaigned against various social evils like casteism, child marriage etc. He stressed on the importance of religious tolerance. He however fought against ignorance and blind beliefs. He was amongst the earliest Indians to realise the importance of modern technology, the need for good transport facilities, hospital and irrigation facilities. To achieve all these and to ensure progressive social change, he knew that education reform was a necessity. It was primarily due to his efforts that English education was introduced in India. Simultaneously, he initiated several measures to ensure the availability of the Upanishads and Vedanta to the common people in their local language.

His fearless and staunch opposition to Sati emboldened the government of the day to decisively act in this matter. He also actively campaigned against the British government clamping

down on the freedom of the press and its discriminatory policies towards employing Indians in Government offices.

Ram Mohan Roy's importance in modern Indian history rests upon the fact that he revived interest in the ethical principle of the Vedanta school as a counterpoise to the western assault on Indian culture. He founded the Brahmo Samaj which brought about social reforms such as inter-caste marriages, widow re-marriage etc.



Saint Ramalingar (Vallalar)

(1823 - 1874 AD)

Vallalar, an apostle of peace and non-violence, was born to orthodox parents in the 19th century when India was under British rule. At that time, Hinduism was confronted by two serious threats- one from within its own fold, which had developed due to the age-long caste system and the other was from foreign sources.

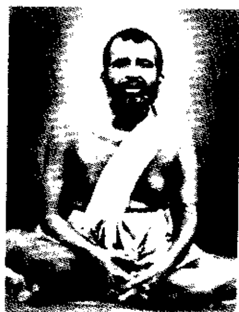
Caste divisions had become a tool to divide society and inhibited the promotion of unity and peace. He realised that social reforms like eradication of caste system could be successfully implemented through the efforts of a strong, committed and organised group. Thus, Sanmarga Sangam (Path of Righteousness) was founded in 1865, which admitted into its fold all, irrespective of caste, religion and nationality.

He condemned the economic state of the society in which people had to beg for the necessities of life. In 1867 when the opportunity arose, he established Satya Dharma Sala (Sanctuary for Eternal Service). Its sole aim was to feed the poor irrespective of gender, caste, religion and nationality. Even to this day, hospitality is unrestricted and limitless.

He laid great emphasis on universal brotherhood and unity of all religious paths. As a symbol of universal brotherhood he

consecrated the Gnana Sabha (Universal Hall of Worship) in 1871, where the divine is worshipped in the form of Eternal Effulgence. People belonging to all castes and religions congregate here and offer prayers in sublime equality, peace and serenity.

Thus we see Vallalar as the forerunner and the unseen spirit behind later day reformers like Mahatma Gandhi.



Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa

(1836 - 1886 AD)

"All religions are true. God can be reached by different religions. Many rivers flow by many ways but they fall into the sea. There all are one."

Sri Ramakrishna, a renowned saint of the 19th century, was born in a poor and pious family. From an early age, he exhibited his spiritual and mystical leanings.

He possessed a unique charm that reached out to several people cutting across all barriers of caste, gender, education and economic status. He treated all religious practices as equal and goaded people to strive to develop their inner potential without wasting time over religious quibblings and sensory pleasures. According to him religions are like so many paths leading to the same goal, viz. one's highest moral development.

Sri Ramakrishna's emphasis on performance of duties and credo of selfless service to mankind grabbed the imagination of the youth, the most prominent being Swami Vivekananda, who started the Sri Ramakrishna Mission. The missions are active in the fields of education and community development all over the world.



Swami Vivekananda

(1863 - 1902 AD)

Swami Vivekananda was born Narendranath Dutta. He grew up to be a forthright, fearless and articulate youth who could hold his own in scholarly discussions on politics, religion and society. His intellectual pursuits led him to Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa at a very young age.He was greatly inspired by his message of service and religious tolerance. After Sri Ramakrishna's passing away, he took up the challenge of spreading his Master's message to the world.

It was during this time that he assumed the name of Swami Vivekananda. He travelled extensively throughout India, sometimes on foot. What he witnessed shocked him. Rural India was in the grip of ignorance, superstition and caste-tyranny, while the upper classes didn't seem to care. Their callousness only made him more determined to weed out the evils in society. To achieve this, he realised the importance of education and its role in mobilizing the masses; as a mere handful of educated men and women could not solve the nation's problems.

His vision for India was to create a new social order and a new civilization by combining her best spiritual traditions with the latest advancements in science and technology. An India that is rich both materially and spiritually. He knew that material

affluence alone was not enough, man had to be human, too. He wanted India to set an example in this. Thus, the Sri Ramakrishna Missions came into existence.

The Ramakrishna Mission stands for religious and social reform, but takes its inspiration from the ancient culture of India. At the same time, it recognizes the value and utility of developments in natural sciences and technology. Another characteristic feature of the Mission is a belief in the truth of all religions. A purely monastic order, it disseminates reforming ideas among the masses without violently uprooting them from their social or religious environments. Anyone with a yearning to serve is admitted to the Mission, irrespective of their caste or creed.

A tireless crusader for inter-religious harmony, Swami Vivekananda believed in the commonality of values in all religious paths. In his speech at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, he said *"It has been proved to the world that holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world, and that every system has produced men and women of the most exalted character. In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: Help and not Fight, Assimilation and not Destruction, Harmony and Peace and not Dissension."*

Swami Vivekananda's fearlessness, idealism and vision is still a source of inspiration to millions of Indian youth.



Shirdi Sai Baba

(1863 - 1918 AD)

"Never ask a saint his caste or creed", said Kabir. Even a casual study of Sai Baba's life shows that he offered an eclectic Hindu-Muslim synthesis, perhaps to promote amity between the two dominant and mutually distrustful communities in India. Sai Baba is not a name; the word *Sai* comes from the Persian expression *saih*, which means an itinerant *Sufi fakir*. He came to be called Sai Baba after coming to Shirdi.

By appearance, he was a Muslim fakir, but, it has been noted, his ears were pierced - a Hindu sign. He lived in a mosque but named it *Dwarka-mai* (after the birthplace of Lord Krishna) and in it kept a sacred fire going. He had intimate knowledge of Hindu holy books and the Koran and was well versed in the Indian Sufi lineage. He promoted both Hindu and Muslim festivals and sent money and materials for the renovation of Hindu temples.

The oppositon of the orthodox Hindus and Muslims could not dent Sai Baba's appeal to the masses which has only grown with time. Thousands of people of all castes and faiths throng his shrine in Shirdi everyday.



Sri Aurobindo

(1872 - 1956 AD)

Sri Aurobindo was born in 1872 in Calcutta. After completing his education in England, he returned to India in 1893 and taught French and English at the Baroda college. But he quickly realized that the need of the moment was the liberation of India from British rule and plunged into the freedom struggle and even underwent imprisonment for the same.

Sri Aurobindo, while praising the original caste system, does not spare it in its later stages. He said, "It is the nature of human institutions to degenerate; there is no doubt that the institution of caste degenerated. It ceased to be determined by spiritual qualifications which, once essential, have now come to be subordinate and even immaterial and is determined purely by birth." He held that a spiritual man of pariah birth is superior in the divine values to an unspiritual and worldly-minded Brahmin.

In the Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry in South India, people of all castes and creed and nationalities live together and participate in social and spiritual activities.



Babasaheb Ambedkar

(1891 - 1956 AD)

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, the fourteenth son of Ramji and Bhimabai Sakpal Ambavedkar, was born on April 14, 1891, in Mhow, a city in Central India into the 'untouchable' Mahar caste. His father and grandfather were in the British Army. The Government required all army personnel and their families to be educated and ran schools for this purpose. Thus, the Sakpal family was fortunate to receive good education which would have been denied to them otherwise.

Bhim proved to be an exceptional and hardworking student.While in school, Bhim's brahmin teacher Ambedkar, entered Bhim's last name into the school records as Ambedkar. Ambedkar being the name of a higher caste, the teachers felt that there would be fewer impediments for Bhim's education. Teachers Ambedkar and Pendse - both brahmins, were kind and affectionate to young Bhim. They made the few fond memories Dr. Ambedkar had of his school days.

Bhim received financial assistance and scholarships from Sri Sayaji Rao, the Maharaja of Baroda for pursuing higher studies in USA. He earned a PhD degree from Columbia University in 1916.

In July 1924, Ambedkar founded the Bahishkrut Hitkaraini Sabha. The aim of the Sabha was to uplift the socially and politically downtrodden and bring them to the level of the others in the Indian society. Soon he became a father-figure to the poor and downtrodden and was respectfully called 'Babasaheb'.

In May 1956, on Buddha's Anniversary, Dr. Ambedkar announced that on October 14 he would embrace Buddhism. With him his wife and some three hundred thousand followers also converted to the faith. On December 5, 1956, Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar died peacefully in his sleep.



Sri Narayana Guru

(1856 - 1928 AD)

"One caste, One Religion, One God for all men."

Born in Kerala in the Ezhava community (classified under OBC), Nanu Asan (Narayan Guru) became a Sanskrit scholar and social reformer. He preached brotherhood for all and fought against the ills of the caste system which prevailed in the society those days.

Narayana Guru led a quiet but significant social revolution. A champion of the humble and the downtrodden, he said, *"If you are a good person, then caste or religion cease to matter"*.

After the death of his father and his wife, Nanu Asan spent his life as a wandering Sanyasin. Though his activities were mostly confined to Kerala, his mission of helping the needy people transcended geographical boundaries as well as barriers of caste and religion.

In 1888 at Aruvipuram(some 20 km south of Trivandrum) Narayana Guru consecrated a Shiva temple defying the tradition that only a Brahmin priest could officiate at such religious events.

This was the beginning of a movement for social reform by

Sri Narayana Guru. He constantly reminded people of the fact that 'all are human'. In spite of the availability of religious teachings, the society was in the grip of superstition. Sri Narayana Guru's efforts were directed towards eradicating the superstitious beliefs in society.

He mingled with people of all denominations and in 1904 decided to give up his itinerant life and settle down amongst the lower caste and untouchables. He would say that, "They too are God's children, just as everyone else is". His sole aim was to build a casteless society.

Sri Narayana Guru was a great Sanskrit scholar and authored a number of books in Sanskrit and Malayalam. Amongst his works, 'Jati Mimamsa' (an enquiry into caste), a poem in five stanzas is of great significance. It succintly conveys Sri Narayana Guru's philosophy of life- *"There is no reason for caste differences among human beings. All those who posses humanity are human beings. Men may differ in their faiths, their languages and their modes of dressing; but there can be no evil in inter-dining and inter-marriage, because all belong to the Divine".*



Mahatma Gandhi

(1869 - 1948 AD)

Mahatma Gandhi is often referred to in India as 'The Father of the Nation'. He is regarded as the chief architect of the Indian freedom struggle. However, his crusade against injustice began first in Durban, South Africa, where he found himself treated as a member of an inferior race. Appalled at the widespread denial of civil liberties and political rights to Indian immigrants in South Africa, he threw himself into the struggle for elementary rights.

Mahatma Gandhi remained in South Africa for 20 years, suffering imprisonment many times. In 1896, after being attacked and beaten by white South Africans, Gandhi began to teach a policy of passive resistance to, and non-cooperation with, the South African authorities. He called it Satyagraha. In 1914 the government of the Union of South Africa made important concessions to Gandhi's demands, following which he returned to India.

With this, the stage for the Satyagraha shifted to India, where he plunged into the freedom struggle and launched the movement of passive resistance to Great Britain.

Mahatma Gandhi realised that mere political freedom without economic self reliance and social emancipation was meaningless.

Economic exploitation by the British had resulted in extreme poverty and the virtual destruction of Indian home industries. Thus, economic independence involving the complete boycott of British made goods and the revival of cottage industries became a corollary of his Swaraj movement.

Gandhiji also rebelled against the British policies of dividing society along religious and caste lines. In September 1932, while in jail, Gandhiji undertook a 'fast unto death' to improve the status of the untouchables.

Although he was himself a member of the Vaishya (merchant) caste, Mahatma Gandhi was great leader of the movement to eradicate the unjust social and economic aspects of the caste system.



Sri Sathya Sai Baba

(1926 - AD)

Sathya Sai Baba was born in Puttaparthi, a small village in South India. As a child, he demonstrated exemplary qualities of compassion, generosity, and wisdom, which clearly distinguished him from the other children of his village.

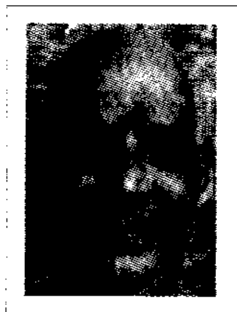
Sai Baba's ashram, which is called *Prasanthi Nilayam* (the Abode of Divine Peace) was built in 1950. It has been the gathering place of spiritual pilgrims of varied faiths and descent.

Inspired by his teachings, many service projects have been launched in the field of education, health care and community services.

A model education system has been set up to cater to students of all ages. No fees are charged and admission is open to all, regardless of caste, creed or economic status. In addition to emphasizing the pursuit of academic excellence, community service is also included as part of the curriculum.

Free medical services, drinking water project for the poor etc. are also part of the regular service activities

Sathya Sai Baba's message of love, service and peace continues to inspire people from all sections of the society.



Swami Sivananda

(1887 - 1963 AD)

Born in 1887 in Pattamadai, Tamil Nadu, South India, Swami Sivananda whose name then was Kuppuswami was a brilliant student and gymnast. A deep desire to serve led him to become a doctor.

Dr. Kuppuswami gained fame as an excellent doctor and a true humanitarian. Very often he waived consultation fees for patients too poor to afford his services and on many occasions provided free medicine to his neediest patients.

His life took a different direction, when he was initiated in Yoga and Vedanta by a wandering Sanyasin, whom he happened to treat. His desire to help and serve expanded as he now began to perceive the need to help people on a more profound level by healing not just the body but by finding a cure for all suffering.

His inner quest took him to Rishikesh, at the foothills of the Himalayas, where he found his Guru who initiated him into Sanyas. After taking these vows, he came to be known as Swami Sivananda Saraswati.

Swami Sivananda became one of the most prolific Yoga teachers who has ever existed. Although he rarely left the small town of Rishikesh, Swami Sivananda's teachings spread quickly

throughout the planet. He has authored more than 200 books on topics connected to Yoga and Philosophy. He wrote in a style that is very direct and bursting with dynamic, spiritual energy. Millions of people have benefitted from his teachings.

He was a pioneer of Yoga and Vedanta of the previous century and has admitted people from all castes into his fold and administered the vows of Sanyas to them. In his galaxy of swamis, there are several who hail from a Shudra or Dalit background and all of them are greatly revered.

The teachings of Swami Sivananda can be summarized as ***"Serve, Love, Give, Purify, Meditate, Realize"***.



Lord Swami Narayan

Swami Narayan was a humble servant in the Ashram of Swami Ramanand. He showed such exceptional promise and sincerity that he was initiated and later appointed Swami Ramanand's successor.

Thousands of people from all walks of life, of all talents and stations, of all positions and powers joined the flock of Lord Swami Narayan. Scholars and music maestros, spiritual seekers and spiritual leaders came forth and took initiation from him.

He established a lineage of Guru's to maintain the purity of his teachings. They are respected and revered all over the world, irrespective of their caste.

Several service projects have been initiated by Swami Narayan's followers. Prominent amongst them are those for the upliftment of the underprivileged tribal population in India. Educational campaigns, programs for upliftment of women, vocational education and health services have helped transform the bleak landscape and quality of living of the tribal population. Thousands have been freed from superstition and exploitation and from dependence on addictive drugs and alcohol.



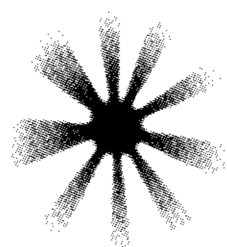
Sri Sri Sri Thiruchi Swamigal

(1929 - AD)

Born on March 20th, 1929, he was named Palaniswami. A precocious child, he embraced the religious life when yet a teenager and associated with various holy men and women, both Hindu and Muslim. In his 20s, he was initiated as Jagadguru Sri Sri Sri Shivarathnapuri Bhagawath now affectionately known by his devotees as Thiruchi Swami. He established the Kailas Ashram in Bangalore, India, and is well known throughout South India as a spiritual leader and healer.

In, the Kailas Ashram is a patasala (vedic school) founded by swamiji. The patasala has groomed a steady stream of proficient priests to serve in temples across the world. Significantly, one's caste is not a consideration to join the school and become a priest. The only qualifications required are devotion, faith and an inclination to serve as a priest.

Some of the patasala boys have opted to become renunciates and have joined his or another ashram. They are widely respected all over India. Prominent among these swamis is Jagadguru Sri Sri Sri Balagangadharanatha Swami of Adi Chunchanagiri Math.



Brahma Kumaris

The Brahma Kumaris trace their origins from a small community of dedicated seekers under the spiritual guidances of Dada Lekhraj (later known as Brahma Baba).

In 1950, the community moved from Karachi to Mount Abu, a quiet place reputed for its ancient spiritual heritage. Nestled high up in the Aravali mountains of Rajasthan, it provided an ideal location for reflection and contemplation. In 1952, Brahma Baba, as Dada Lekhraj had become known, felt that it was time to reach out to the rest of India and share this knowledge, as he was aware of the devastating scars the troubled independence process and partition had left on peoples' lives. A few sisters left their haven and moved to Bombay and Delhi 'on service'. Their task was to establish study centres where the knowledge of Raja Yoga would be taught. Today, there is scarcely a town in India where the name of Brahma Kumaris has not been heard.

From a modest beginning, now there are Brahma Kumaris centres in more than 70 countries. Mt. Abu is now a place of piligrimage for over a quarter of a million people of all ethnic origins and religious beliefs. It is a place where men, women and children can reach their unique human potential and cultivate the values of our common humanity.



Mata Amritanandamayi (Amma)

(1953 - AD)

Sudhamani, as Amma was called, was born in 1953 in an extremely poor family of fishermen in the lush state of Kerala. Her spiritual leanings became evident when very young. However, she had to face several obstacles and hardships posed by those who could not understand her.

As a youth, Amma's reputation reached well beyond her village and she began to attract large gatherings wanting to be in her presence and receive her blessings.

Today, people from all walks of life, of varied beliefs, occupation and descent visit her Ashram.

Service to the poor and needy is an integral part of Mata Amritanandamayi's mission. Several orphanages, hospitals and educational institutions have been opened with her blessings.

Mata Amritanandamayi is a living example of how in India, a saint though originating from a lower caste, is respected by one and all.



Adi Parasakthi Movement
Bangaru Adigalar

(1942 - AD)

Born in 1942, Swami Bangaru Adigalar is considered and worshipped as an incarnation of the Divine mother. He is the founder and inspiration behind the Adi Parasakthi movement which is based in Melmaruvathur in the South Indian State of Tamil Nadu.

What started in a small village, amidst stiff opposition from the villagers in the late 1960's ignited a spiritual and social regeneration in Tamil Nadu. Thousands of people from all religious and economic backgrounds throng Melmaruvathur to seek his blessings.

The Adi Parasakthi movement has been largely responsible for emancipation of women by breaking social taboos and allowing them to officiate as temple priests.

The Adiparasakthi Charitable, Educational, Medical and Cultural Trust is involved in:

- Providing free medical care to a large rural community
- Educational Institutions from primary to post graduation in all branches of learning
- Promotion of modern scientific farming methods
- Providing employment to the rural community
- Social activities unifying all castes, religions, races and

cultures under one roof for the upliftment of society
- Liberating women from the clutches of traditional protocols and involving them in spiritual and social activities

By tirelessly working to create an atmosphere of peace and brotherhood among all his devotees, Adigalar has earned the respect of everyone who comes to see him.



Sri Sri Sri Balagangadharanatha Swami

(1945 - AD)

Sri Sri Sri Balagangadharanatha Swamiji is the 71st pontiff in a long lineage of spiritual leaders of the Sri Adi Chunchanagiri Math. Established over 1500 years ago, this ancient Math has engaged itself in preserving and propagating Indian heritage through the ages.

Ever since Sri Sri Sri Balagangadharanatha Swamiji became the head of the Math, the service activities of the Math have increased several fold. The Math is striving for the welfare and betterment of the common people irrespective of their social status and religious background. He often undertakes intensive tours within the villages in India, inspiring his devotees to involve themselves in the service of the needy. He has established several centres all over India to promote integration of various sections of the society. The activities of these centres range from spiritual exercises and propagation of Sanskrit to promotion of local crafts and culture and women's empowerment. He has also created several dedicated monks from various castes who are involved in social and health service projects.

The Math has founded more than 250 educational institutions which offer education in diverse disciplines - ranging from vedic studies to high-tech engineering studies. Institutions have been

founded to train rural women and provide them with gainful employment. A residential school for the blind provides free education and boarding to hundreds of blind children.

A 1050 bed hospital in an interior rural area, provides the latest in health care free of charge to the backward and needy in the region.

Swamiji is a great patron of the dalits in Karnataka state and his interest and involvement in service has inspired several devotees to engage themselves in service activities.

More than 20 million people have benefitted through the blessings of Swamiji and the activities of the Math.

Radhasoami's

Radhasoamis are a spiritual movement founded in 1861 by a banker named Shiv Dayal Sahib (later known as Soamiji Maharaj). Their doctrine is based on the Vedantic philosophy of Hinduism. They focus on a society that is casteless, ritual free and knowledge based. Community service and devotion are their main mottos.

There have been several leaders of the sect since Soamiji and many have arisen from a dalit background too. This just shows that irrespective of descent or caste, one can ascend to the highest seat of the Radhasoamis.

Hundreds of thousands of people assemble in their satsangs (religious assemblies) irrespective of their caste and creed, share food and meditate.

Swami Sharananandji

Swami Sri Sharananandji Maharaj was a revolutionary Sanyasi (renunciate).

At a very early age in his life he lost his eyesight, but it could not diminish either his love for God or his desire to serve humanity. He established the Manav Seva Sangh, which has its headquarters in Brindavan. His vision for humanity to bring into practice the three principles of seva (service), prem (love) and tyag (sacrifice) inspired hundreds of people.

All those who came in touch with him were profoundly transformed. Swami Sharananandji Maharaj worked to eliminate casteism and uplift all, regardless of what caste they belonged to. He was a pioneer in bringing about a sense of belongingness among all the castes in the early part of the 20th century. He took the message of *'koi aur nahin hai; koi gair nahin hai'* (there is no one other, there is no stranger) to several districts in Central and Southern India.

His teachings are very profound yet very practical. They are available in cassettes and printed form.

Bihar School of Yoga

Bihar School of yoga was started by Swami Satyananda Saraswati in Munger, Bihar.

He has given sanyas to people irrespective of their caste, creed, race and gender. He has propagated oneness of humanity and established that every human being has a right to wisdom.

Millions of people have derived great physical and spiritual benefit through his teachings and the institution.

Unlike many other organisations who claim to be working for the dalits in Bihar and are engaged in fuelling a sense of revenge and hatred among various communities, he has brought about a social reform in the society, by uplifting the dignity of the dalits by making them Sanyasis of the highest Hindu order, who are revered by all castes and creeds.

The Muthappan Temple



Did You Know ?

At Parassinikadavu, a town in northern Kerala, there is a temple whose presiding deity is Muthappan - a dalit, who is considered an incarnation of Lord Shiva. A brahmin cannot serve as a priest in this temple and all the priests are people of dalit or shudra or atishudra origin. Toddy is one of the offerings made to the deity and all the rituals are derived from the local folklore. The prasad[1] that is given to the devotees is Tea and Channa (Chickpeas), the staple food of the poor in that region.

This temple where the deity is dalit, the priest is a dalit and the custodians are shudras, is thronged by people of all castes and majority are from the upper castes. This is one place where all caste differences are forgotten.

Sabarimala is another place in Kerala where caste hindus and dalits sit together, pray together, stay and dine together without any trace of discrimination. Everyone who goes to the temple after taking a vow is highly revered.

1. Prasad - Food that is offered to the deity and later distributed to the devotees

The Fire that leads

This book endeavours to show that whatever the abuses committed in the name of caste, not only the idea of equality has always ruled supreme in the minds of India's Sages, but also that many of India's most revered Saints and Philosophers came from the lowest strata of Indian society.

This compilation is but the proverbial tip of the iceberg. There is no shortage of inspirational personalities who have contributed towards the emancipation of the lower classes either in our scriptures or recorded history, not counting those whom history has forgotten and the present day saints! Constraints of time and space prevent us from discussing their contributions in a more detailed manner. An indicative list is however given below:

Pagal Baba - He constructed a temple for people of all castes and creed

Odiya Baba - He was Pagal Baba's Guru. He said that if one could not see the Divine in a heap of mud, then one could not see it anywhere else.

Swami Ramsukhdas - though born an untouchable, was revered by everyone.

Dvadasha Darshanacharya Swami Kashikanandagiri is believed to have been born a Shudra. He has authored several books for the benefit of all.

Baba Nagpal, Tatwale Baba, Swami Kailasanand Saraswati, Vishnu Devanandji, Annamachari, Pithukuli Murugadas, Pilot Baba, Mast Ram Baba, Beli Mata, Siddharama of Sholapur, Guru Lingeshwara, Pamban Swamigal, Kaduvelli Siddhar, Pambatti Siddhar, Agappey Siddhar , Alagani Siddhar, Nandanar, Ratnagiri Swami, Sridhar Swamigalu, Sadasiva Brahmendra, Judge Swamigal, Kaivar Narayan Dada, Adi Jambava Mata, Siddharoodharu, goraknath, Matsyendranath, Balaknath, Sant Shisunala Shariff (Kabir of Karnataka), Goura Kumbhara, Sakkubhai, Nijaguna Siva Yogi, Ramlinga Swamigal, Pattanathar, Sri Chinmayananda, Ramachandra mission, Swami Shiva Balayogi, Swami Kaivar Narayanappa, Swami Ghatalli Anjanappa, Swami Nityananda, Baba Muktanand and many others are saints hailing either from lower castes or humble backgrounds. They are revered and followed by people in different parts of the country. Many of these Saints gave sanyas to people who belonged to various castes and backgrounds and worked to unite them all, regardless of their caste, creed or classes.

May *Agni* lead us into newer dimensions!

(Rigveda)

The Art of Living Courses

The Art of Living Foundation is an international non-profit educational and service organization devoted to uplifting human values. In addition to numerous charitable services, the foundation offers special workshops to improve the quality of life for the individual. These workshops are at present taught in more than 130 countries.

The Art of Living basic course is the ideal introduction to the teachings of Sri Sri Ravishankar. The workshop offers powerful, practical techniques that eliminate stress and fatigue, restore basic health, and enhance the blossoming of one's full potential.

The core practice taught in the basic course is the *Sudarshan Kriya.* A powerful rhythmic breathing process, it eliminates stress and toxins from every cell of the body. The Sudarshan Kriya restores harmony between the mind, emotions and body, pent up emotions and frustrations dissolve and one feels relaxed, refreshed and rejuvenated.

A few of the benefits of the program are:

- Improved health and immunity
- Enhanced concentration and memory
- Reduction of negative emotions
- Clarity of mind
- Freedom from stress and fatigue

Millions of people from all walks of life have found a lasting sense of peace and fulfillment with the Art of Living.

5H Program

Health, Hygiene, Harmony, Human Values and Homes for the poor.

Sri Sri Ravishankar's vision for promotion of human values and all-round development of society led to the inception of the 5H program. The aim of the 5H program is to uplift individuals, families, communities and nations so that the finest human qualities are nurtured and the full potential of human life can be expressed throughout society. Ultimately, the long term goal is far-reaching social transformation, where poverty, misery and disease are eradicated and where peace and harmony prevail throughout the world.

The program has been initiated by the International Association for Human Values (IAHV). In India, the 5H program is implemented jointly by The Art of Living Foundation and IAHV. The activities undertaken are:

1. Rural youth training: Youths hailing from the rural areas are given thorough training that encompasses physical training, promotes mental stremgth and toughness, enhances self esteem and confidence, vocational skills for self-employment and inspires them to take up projects for the social and economic development of their communities.

2. Village adoption: Over 2000 villages have been adopted by dedicated volunteers trained in implementing projects for increasing awareness of health and hygiene, building homes for the poor and promoting harmony and human values. Youths from the rural youth training program participate in the implementation of these projects.

3. Harmony in Diversity: A program initiated by IAHV and the Art of Living foundation where people from diverse backgrounds get together and celebrate their life as one family.

4. Women's upliftment: Uneducated women hailing from the poorest of the poor families are given training in skills like tailoring, type-writing, bee-keeping etc. These skills enable these women to start up small scale industries that provide for their welfare and also generate employment for those around them.

For more details on 5H programme, please visit **www.5h.org**

For additional information on International Association for Human Values, please isit: **www.iahv.org**

Centres Around The World

For additional information on The Art of Living courses, please contact the centres below

or visit: *http://www.artofliving.org*

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Books & Tapes

The audio cassettes, videotapes and books of Sri Sri Ravishankar's teachings are now available by mail.

Some of the titles available are:

- The Path of Love (a commentary on the Narada Bhakti Sutras)
- Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (a commentary by Sri Sri Ravishankar)
- The Four Pillars of Knowledge
- Compassion and Trust

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